



npc  the national postgraduate committee

NPC Wales - Your Postgraduate Voice in Wales

Briefing for new students' union officers on postgraduate issues in Wales

**For the attention of Education Officers, Presidents,
Postgraduate Officers, Postgraduate Association Executives,
and Mature Students Officers**

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Welcome to office from NPC Wales

2001/2 has been an important time for the National Postgraduate Committee in Wales. At the start of the session the Welsh sub-committee was entirely vacant, and had not been filled since it was created. NPC Wales held its inaugural meeting in March 2002. Despite starting late in the academic session, we have made a good start. We elected a committee, and held a further meeting in Swansea in May. We commenced our campaigning activities with a petition to the National Assembly about the impact of Assembly Learning Grants and Financial Contingency Funds on postgraduates. We wrote to the Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning to find out what had happened to the Rees Report recommendations about postgraduates. We contacted every students' union and guild of students in Wales, by post, email and telephone, as well as UCMC and SEWNUS. We produced and distributed our bilingual newsletter in Wales, set up web pages, an email discussion list, and postal and email addresses. It has been a busy few months.

And our work for 2002/3 starts early, with this document in fact. To campaign successfully at the national level, we must support this with effective communication at the local level. We would like to know what issues your postgraduates are encountering, so that the whole of Wales can work together to tackle these issues. The email discussion list is one way of staying in touch during the year. You can sign up by visiting www.npc.org.uk/jiscmail.

Besides being a communication tool, we hope this document will be a useful reference tool during the year to come, bringing you up-to-date on some current national issues, and exploring the "generic" challenges of postgraduate representation in any students union.

We hope you have a successful and exciting year in office, and look forward to working with you.



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1.0 Introduction

The vast majority of students' union officers have never been postgraduate students, yet at some stage during the course of their office they must represent the interests of postgraduates. Officers receive little or no training or briefing on postgraduate issues from their union or NUS. Postgraduates themselves are less often directly involved in the running of their union than undergraduate students. Some unions address this issue by electing a part-time postgraduate officer to encourage postgraduate involvement, and to benefit from this additional perspective. Others have postgraduate committees or associations which perform a similar function, either as an integral part of the student union, or as semi-autonomous bodies.

An absence of personal experience need not stand as a barrier to representing the interests of a particular group of students, of course. With this point in mind, this briefing offers all students union officers in Wales an overview of who postgraduates are, what issues they face, the role of postgraduates in students unions, and possible paths for future action during this year, and beyond. Some issues are specific to Wales, others are relevant across the whole of the UK.

More information on postgraduate issues can be found on the NPC website, www.npc.org.uk. Further specific guidance may be given by the NPC Wales officers, or the NPC UK General Secretary, who can be contacted by emailing npc@npc.org.uk.

1.1 What is the NPC?

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) is the representative body for postgraduates in the UK. We are made up of student representatives from educational institutions with postgraduate students. The NPC aims to promote the interests of postgraduates studying in the UK, while remaining politically non-aligned.

We seek to influence policy nationally, acting as a campaigning voice and a resource of information for postgraduates. We have contacts with many organisations which are involved with postgraduate affairs, including NUS, the UK Council for Graduate Education, research councils, government departments and the media.

However, much of our work involves giving advice on postgraduate issues and providing a forum for postgraduates to debate matters of common interest. Our services include advice to affiliated students' unions and postgraduate societies, a series of guidelines and draft codes of practice intended to promote improved quality of postgraduate provision, and electronic mailing lists.

We are funded by subscriptions from affiliated institutions. We employ a sabbatical officer to work full time for NPC, but still rely largely on volunteers

(most of whom are full-time postgraduate students). These are all elected at the Conference held each summer.

On a UK level, we hold meetings at least every four months at venues around the country. In Wales we meet three times a year. Every affiliated institution is entitled to vote, and all postgraduates are welcome to attend. These meetings decide on Committee policy, and also act as national forums for postgraduates.

This document has been sent to all students unions and guilds in Wales, regardless of whether they are affiliated to the NPC. Please pass this document to interested colleagues. And if your union is not affiliated to NPC, we hope you will consider doing so during this academic year, to enjoy the full benefits of NPC membership.

2.0 Who are Wales's postgraduates?

There are nearly 20,000 postgraduates studying in Wales, nearly 18.4% of the total number of Higher Education students.

2.1 What do postgraduates do?

Postgraduates can be divided roughly into two groups - taught and research.

Taught courses typically last twelve months full-time or two years part-time. They comprise two elements, firstly modular courses assessed by coursework and/or exam, and secondly a dissertation or practical project, usually completed during the summer months, and submitted in September. Taught courses can be further broken into two broad categories - academic and vocational. In subjects where undergraduate courses last three years, potential research students are often encouraged/required to undertake a one year taught masters course as preparation for the more substantial research degree. In subjects where undergraduate courses last four years (resulting in the award of a masters degree), such taught masters courses are less common. As well as being regarded as a preparation for a research degree, the academic one year masters is a valuable qualification in its own right, enabling further pursuit of matters arising in undergraduate study, and offering an edge in the jobs market. Vocationally-orientated masters courses include the Law Practice Course (LPC) and the Masters of Business Administration (MBA). These courses often attract large numbers of students. They often contain a research project in the same way as other masters courses, but feature continuous assessment more prominently, either in the form of coursework or exams during the year.

Research students usually register for an MPhil, and then upgrade to a PhD at the end of the first year of study. There is a period of research (2 years for MPhil, 3 years for PhD) followed by a "writing-up" period of 1 year. Students are not funded during their writing-up period. Research degrees are assessed by a thesis (usually about 60-80,000 words). This is examined in an oral viva voce where the student discusses their thesis with two examiners, one internal (not their supervisor), and one external. These regulations vary between institutions, but this is the typical procedure. In the case of a PhD there are a range of options open to the examiner: the thesis can be passed, passed with minor corrections (you've passed as long as you rectify the specified errors), returned with major corrections (the thesis has to be corrected and re-submitted followed by another viva), awarded an MPhil, or (this never happens the first time) failed outright.

In the sciences, research students often have their own desk, spending much time working in the lab, working as part of a team of researchers, in more or less daily contact with their supervisors. They may be required to keep office hours, and to book time off. By contrast arts research students may not have a desk (though provision of a dedicated postgrad study room is normal), work alone on their area of research, and see their supervisor once a month. All

research students work all year round (honest!). The usual guidance is that research students would be expected to take no more than eight weeks leave a year.

Postgraduates can be found in every academic department, although there are generally more postgraduates in the sciences, engineering and law, slightly fewer in the social sciences, and fewer still in the arts and humanities. This reflects the more intense economic determination of postgraduate numbers - science and engineering generate income, and the supply of such research students is (therefore) a political issue in the UK. While making a contribution to knowledge, the work of arts research students does not directly generate profit usually, so funding is far harder to obtain, and the number of postgraduates in these subjects is far lower.

2.2 Is there a typical postgraduate student?

The range of postgraduate courses available dictates that there is no such thing as a typical postgraduate student. But there are further factors that contribute to making postgraduates a particularly diverse group.

60% of postgraduates in Wales study **part-time**. The proportion of part-time students varies widely between institutions from 37% at Cardiff University to 97% at NEWI. Not all courses are available in this mode of study - sometimes the justification for this is clear, at other times it is less so.

20% of postgraduates are **international students**. Substantially higher fees are demanded from international students, and there are fewer funding options available, so many are self-funded. For some courses, international students' annual fees total £12000.

Many postgraduates are **mature students**, if you define 25 as the threshold. If you define it as 21, then virtually all postgraduates are mature students. Some go straight from undergraduate study, others are returning to education after a break.

Some postgraduates spend a considerable period a long distance from their institution, either because they live a long distance away, or because their research demands travel.

In fact many of the students that students' unions work find hard to attract to the union building, for social or democratic activities, are postgraduates. These issues were treated more fully in a joint document, *Increasing Postgraduate Involvement in Students' Unions*, produced by NUS, NPC and AUT in 2000.

2.3 What are the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students?

While much of this document seeks to highlight the differences between different groups of postgraduates, and between postgraduates and others, it is possible to forget that many of the needs and interests of postgraduate and undergraduate students are shared.

The stereotype of the "nerdy" postgraduate, pasty-faced, and innocent of the distractions of popular culture, is rarely exemplified! While postgraduates generally have more work to do than undergraduates, and it is more difficult to get away with doing the bare minimum (especially for research students), the union bar and night club is an equally likely haunt for many. It is worth bearing in mind that postgraduates have also previously been undergraduates. If they remain at the same institution, especially without a break, many continue in identical social patterns to those already established. Where a student changes institutions they may be surprised to find that there are differences between the institutions. This issue can be intensified where the student has previously studied in a different country.

2.4 How do postgraduates apply?

Postgraduates do not apply for study through UCAS - there is no centralised application system, so every institution handles postgraduate applications itself. Institutions are increasingly tending towards centralising their system, but the decisions are largely taken by applicants directly approaching individual departments.

2.5 How are postgraduates funded?

While undergraduate fees for home students are means tested and the same for all subjects, postgraduate fees vary between subjects and institutions, and are not means tested. For example, a one year masters in an arts subject costs around £3000 in fees. Funding generally comes from four sources:

- Subject-based Research Councils
- A scholarship awarded and funded by the home institution
- Sponsorship
- Self-funding

Sadly under the present system, many postgraduates must rely on the last of these categories. Unsurprisingly, many postgraduates also work part-time to fund themselves. Awards for research students from the research councils are fairly realistic: fees are fully paid, and a grant of £7000 a year is typical. This reflects the fact that research students have already spent three or four years as a student, and that the differential cost to the individual is the difference between the grant and a graduate salary. Institutional awards tend either to match the Research Council awards, or are "fees only" awards, with living costs met by a sponsor or the student themselves. Competition for funding varies between academic subjects - it is intense in the arts and humanities, but computer science departments, for example, often cannot attract (and retain) as many postgraduates as they would wish.

Section 2: Postgraduates

- study all year round
- are often part-time, international students, and/or mature students
- do taught or research degrees
- are often self-funded, or funded by a Research Council

3.0 What are National Postgraduate Issues in Wales?

Responsibility for education is partly devolved to the National Assembly. The Assembly articulates a vision of Wales being "The Learning Country". Yet many powers remain in Westminster. University funding comes through the Assembly, via the Higher Education Funding Council of Wales (HEFCW), to institutions. The Assembly fund and administer the new Assembly Learning Grants (ALGs). But the power to levy/abolish undergraduate tuition fees remains in Westminster.

For postgraduate funding, the subject-based Research Councils are UK-wide bodies. The Overseas Research Awards Scheme, which funds a number of students at Welsh institutions, is funded and administered by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE). Many of the issues affecting postgraduates are not particular to Wales, but effective lobbying on these issues in Wales may involve approaching UK Government, the National Assembly, HEFCW, the Research Councils, and institutions.

The recommendations of the Rees report reflect the partially devolved nature of education in Wales. Largely thanks to evidence submitted by the NPC, a number of recommendations refer specifically to postgraduates, and indicate some of the key issues affecting postgraduates.

3.1 Writing-up Students

Rees says:

Recommendation Ten: We recommend that the National Assembly for Wales, by all means at its disposal, encourages the UK Government to launch a general review into the interface between learners' support and benefit entitlement, with a view to removing anomalies and improving coherence. We are particularly concerned about the interface for postgraduate students 'writing up', where there is clear confusion about their status and variations in interpretation of that status.

Recommendation Forty-Eight: We recommend that the National Assembly for Wales, preferably in liaison with other devolved administrations, initiates dialogue with the DSS to clarify systems and promote a support structure for those learners (including postgraduates writing-up theses) needing to draw upon both welfare benefits and specific funds for living costs while learning.

As mentioned in section 2.1, research students have a three year research period. After this, there is a one year a "writing-up" period. Any funding that the student obtains, normally lasts for three years. So writing-up students are unfunded. Generally institutional support drops out at the end of the three year research period: the student ceases to be registered at the institution, although the student should still have access to their supervisor and departmental facilities, access to central facilities may be reduced (e.g. at Cardiff University you have to apply for a new library card, and can't borrow as many books). The lack of commitment to supporting writing-up students demonstrated by many institutions is truly astonishing. Furthermore some institutions charge writing-up students a fee, despite offering little support.

A minority of students complete their research within three years, in order to avoid the problems of being a writing up student. However many do not,

because their research takes longer, and/or they are under pressure from their supervisor to do more work. Some writing up students start a full-time job, often far away from their place of study, and complete their thesis in their spare time. For these students the absence of support from their institution may not be a problem.

However, many writing up students do not move away, continuing to use their department every day, studying long hours. Because they are not registered as students at their institution, they are liable to pay council tax. Some local authorities (eg Newcastle) accept that writing up students can be studying full time, and exempt them from council tax if their supervisor provides a supporting letter. Most authorities do not recognise writing up students as students and require them to pay council tax. As the Rees report indicates, there is inconsistency, as sometimes writing up students are allowed to apply for support through the benefits system, sometimes they are not as they are still classed as students.

There are two main problems here. One is the number of agencies involved (HEIs, councils, DSS). The second problem is that councils and benefits offices generally (and not unreasonably) don't know what a writing up student is. As a result individuals in comparable situations are treated differently. Working with UK Government, the Assembly could issue clear guidance on this issue, ensuring consistency in support for writing up students. This would enable writing up students who are studying full time to be treated as students, exempt from council tax. Once the studying has been completed, the individual should then be able to apply for the job seekers allowance if necessary while looking for work.

3.2 Postgraduate Students with Disabilities

All students who need to apply for a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) face a large amount of paperwork. Many aren't even aware they are eligible to apply. Furthermore, there is discrepancy between the availability of the DSA for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

An eligible full time undergrad can apply for up to £4255 specialist equipment allowance, £10755 non-medical helpers allowance and a general allowance of £1420 plus travel from their LEA. An eligible postgrad can apply for one allowance of £5120 per year from the LEA, or if funded directly by a research council, an allowance determined by negotiation with the research council and the department. Further assistance can be obtained through access to work schemes.

There are two issues here. Firstly, there is no apparent reason why the PG DSA is less than the UG one. Secondly, research councils are often poorly aware of how they administer DSAs and what their responsibilities are. If you have any queries about this potentially complex subject, contact Natasha Hirst, natashahirst@yahoo.com.

3.3 Student loans and accumulated debt

Rees says:

Recommendation Fourteen: We recommend that the National Assembly for Wales, by all means at its disposal, encourages the UK Government to allow postgraduate learners access to a student loan entitlement.

As this implies, postgraduates are not eligible to apply for student loans. While it would be unrealistic to fund a further three years full time study with a student loan, many postgraduates compile their funding from a number of sources. For example, a masters student with a fees-only award from their institution, and a small grant from an external body could fill the funding gap with a student loan. At the moment, a postgraduate in this situation would have to get an expensive loan from a bank, assuming they hadn't already incurred too much debt

Rees says:

Recommendation Thirteen: We recommend that the National Assembly for Wales works with the UK Government, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly to undertake further investigation and analysis into how best to address the financial burden faced by those choosing to take up postgraduate study.

While HEIs try and increase their student numbers, some attempting to increase their research output by recruiting more postgraduates, it is now more difficult to continue studying because of the massive amount of debt undergraduates now typically incur.

Fighting undergraduate tuition fees is usually the central part of a union's education campaign - success on this issue would clearly have a knock-on benefit for potential postgraduate students. While tuition fees are the headline issue, including a postgraduate dimension in your campaign can enable you to be relevant to more students.

3.4 Assembly Learning Grants (ALGs) and Access Funds

In July 2002, NPC Wales submitted a petition to the National Assembly signed by 400 students. Here is what the petition said:

We the undersigned call on the Assembly to grant Welsh domiciled postgraduate students access to the proposed new Assembly Learning Grant (ALG).

We note the proposals by the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning on 12 February 2002 to introduce Assembly Learning Grants, "which will provide a guaranteed source of extra financial support for students in higher education and, for the first time, students in further education as well" (statement to plenary session of the Assembly 12/2/02). Funding for the new scheme will, following the recommendations of the Independent Investigation into Student Hardship and Funding (the Rees Report), largely come from money presently allocated to Access and Hardship Funds. It is not planned to grant postgraduate students access to the scheme.

We believe that to exclude postgraduate students from the ALG is discriminatory and contrary to the spirit of the scheme. Access to financial support should depend on need, not the level of course being undertaken.

We further believe that the proposed new Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) scheme is unlikely to provide sufficient funds for the needs of Welsh domiciled postgraduate students. Postgraduates currently require significant amounts of Hardship Fund money, notably for childcare costs, and the (greatly reduced) amount of FCF money is unlikely to provide an adequate substitute.

This is the first year that ALGs have been available. We are calling for postgraduates to be eligible to apply for these grants because some of the poorest students are postgraduates. In addition postgraduates make a more than proportionate demand on access funds, or FCFs. This should be recognised in setting these budgets, and in administering these funds in HEIs.

3.5 Postgraduates who teach

Most research students do some teaching, whether it is demonstrating, marking, or teaching tutorials, seminars, or in some circumstances, giving lectures. The methods of appointment and payment vary widely, within and between institutions. Affiliated institutions can get more information from the NPC Guidelines on this issue at <http://www.npc.org.uk/page/1003801995> The NPC works with the AUT and NATFHE to try ensure postgraduates who teach are treated fairly.

3.6 Hidden Costs

Rees says:

Recommendation Forty-Six: We recommend that the National Assembly for Wales encourages ELWa to investigate how best to ensure that providers can meet the full cost of essential equipment, library resources, field trips or other resources regarded as essential for the learner, including postgraduates, to achieve the specified outcomes of a course of study.

As the recommendation implies, this is a similar issue for undergraduates and postgraduates. If extra costs are to be charged to students, this must be clearly stated before the course is undertaken.

3.7 Research into Welsh Affairs

At the moment, there is no guaranteed support by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) for postgraduate study in Welsh, Welsh Literature and Celtic Studies. At present, proposals in these disciplines have to compete with the whole range of Modern Languages (other than English) and Linguistics; given that HEFCW funds AHRB it seems reasonable to expect that the AHRB should do more for postgraduate students in Welsh-specific disciplines.

Key postgraduate issues:

- Writing up students are badly and unclearly supported
- Postgrads can't apply for student loans
- Support for postgrad students with disabilities or special needs is inadequate.
- Postgrads are hindered by the burden of undergraduate debt
- Postgrads can't apply for ALGs
- FCFs should be promoted to postgrads who often need this support
- Research in Welsh Affairs is poorly supported

- Postgraduates who teach must be properly supported

4.0 Postgraduates in Students' Unions

Proportionately fewer postgraduates tend to get involved in students unions compared to undergraduates. This obviously makes it harder to represent the interests of postgraduates, which often differ from those of undergraduates.

4.1 Including Postgraduate Representatives

Every union has its own structure, but most have some kind of positions specifically for postgraduates. These may be postgraduate representatives on the student union council/forum, a postgraduate association, postgraduate committee or postgraduate society. The functions may vary as well, from a social society to a committee representing postgraduate issues to the union and the university. Having a distinctive provision for postgraduates, is a good way of encouraging them to get involved in the union. Once they are involved, it is important to integrate a postgraduate perspective into your union's activities. One way of doing this can be to have a part-time postgraduate officer on your union's executive.

If your union does not have specified representational roles for postgraduates it is a good idea to create some. The NPC can advise on how to do this, and give examples of precedent.

Mature Students' Officers, especially if they are postgraduates themselves, are also well placed to run campaigns on postgraduate issues. However it should also be remembered that a mature students officer may equally be interested in other issues affecting all mature students, and so a mature students officer position cannot always be expected to provide a postgraduate perspective. This is another reason why it is a good idea to have dedicated postgraduate positions.

4.2 Representing Postgraduates Who Teach

As mentioned earlier, many postgraduates teach, as well as study in their academic department. Postgraduates who teach can join the AUT or NATFHE at discounted rates. If you are approached by postgraduates encountering issues through their teaching refer them to the relevant union, who will be able to represent them. AUT represent the pre-1992 sector, NATFHE the post-1992 sector. With this in mind, it is a good idea to establish a contact with the relevant union in your institution.

Postgraduates in the students' union.

- Ensure you have positions for postgraduate representatives
- Include a postgraduate perspective in your provision and campaigns
- Make contact with the lecturers' union in your institution

5.0 Conclusions

This document has attempted to show that there are a wide range of issues affecting postgraduates that students' union officers may wish to get involved in. Whether it is calling for improved provision in your institution, involving postgraduates in your students union, or working on national campaigns, we hope that you will include a postgraduate perspective during the work you do this year. Thanks for reading.

The Postgraduate Challenge

- Campaigning on postgraduate issues in institutions
- Involving postgraduates in the students' union
- Lobbying the Assembly on national issues

Appendix 1: Higher Education Reports

There have been a number of reports into higher education which discuss issues affecting postgraduates, mentioned in passing in this document. For the full reports follow these links:

"The Learning Country" (policy document by the National Assembly Education and Lifelong Learning Minister, Jane Davidson, covering the whole of education) 10 year plan.

<http://www.wales.gov.uk/subieducationtraining/content/learningcountry/tlc-contents-e.htm>

"Investing in Learners: Coherence, clarity and equity for student support in Wales", by the Independent Investigation Group on Student Hardship and Funding in Wales (i.e. **The "Rees" Report**). June 2001. Included specific recommendations regarding postgraduate funding discussed earlier.

<http://www.wales.gov.uk/subieducationtraining/content/schoolperformance/higher/studentfunding-e.htm>

The [National Assembly] Higher Education Review (by the National Assembly Education and Lifelong Learning Committee). 10 year strategic plan. Included controversial clustering model for institutions which has been widely criticised. Stoked the fire for the Cardiff Uni/UWCM merger.

<http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubassembledlearning/content/highered.htm>

"Reaching Higher" (policy document by Jane Davidson). March 2002. Written in the light of the committee review of Higher Education, covers much of the same ground but more cautious.

http://www.learning.wales.gov.uk/scripts/fe/news_details.asp?NewsID=423

"SET for success: The supply of people with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills" by Sir Gareth Roberts (**the "Roberts" Review**). April 2002. Made recommendations to the Treasury regarding the whole of science education, including the increase of stipend levels to postgraduate research students in science, engineering and technology. These were mentioned in the UK Government's comprehensive spending review and will be phased in during 2003-6.

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/documents/enterprise_and_productivity/research_and_enterprise/ent_res_roberts.cfm

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